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The Interest of Young People in Higher Education



Abstract: - Higher education in Kosovo started as early as the late 50's with the establishment of some two-year professional high schools which merged into the University of Prishtina which was founded in 1970 and served for a long time as the only higher education institution in the country. Our case study is Haxhi Zeka University in Peja, which was founded as a University in 2011 and which offers Bachelor and Master studies and consists of six academic units. Our goal is to present the interest of young people to pursue studies in this institution of higher education, the comparison in the last five years, the decline in interest and the main factors that have influenced this decline. Data will also be presented showing the percentage of graduates as well as their penetration in the labour market.

The universities of Kosovo throughout the time have made efforts to reform and develop programs that adapt to the needs of the market and as such affect immediate employment, but also to make them as competitive as possible in foreign labour markets alongside internal ones. However, there are still shortages and the trend of those interested is always in a visible decline despite the stimulation by the government to offer free education for all those who wish to pursue studies at Bachelor and Master degrees. Higher Education Institutions are based on the Law on Higher Education that was approved in May 2003 and was drafted in accordance with the latest developments in European higher education systems. The law determines the obligation for the higher education system of Kosovo to develop in the direction of the goals established by the Bologna process.

Keywords: "Higher education, studies, interest, Kosovo, reforms".

I. INTRODUCTION

As a human being, there is always a need for continuous advancement and improvement of the standard of living. The best way to do this is undoubtedly through education and especially higher education. Higher education in Kosovo has had a direct impact in the development and building of human capacities that bear the main responsibility of the transformation and positive development of the country. Higher education as one of the key drivers of democratic consolidation and economic prosperity has a long history in Kosovo that has contributed to the creation of political and social leadership and the construction of an advanced and fairly democratic society, which directly affects social equality in place. In addition to contributing to the welfare of the state and society, higher education plays a key role in enriching knowledge and skills and enables the creation of professional staff who enter the labour market by applying their knowledge to new generations and the further development of human capital as a necessity and basic condition for the economic development of the country and the improvement of living standards and social progress.

Higher education is of great importance for Kosovo people due to the fact that it equips people with advanced knowledge making them develop critical thinking and develop analytical skills which are necessary to build a strong personality that enables them to perform better well in choosing their career and be successful in their life. Higher education has served for decades as a mainstay of society because it has provided an opportunity for younger generations to be more open to the world by helping them to expand their individual knowledge and experiences and perceive a deeper understanding of the world and global trends and creating a new approach to their role in making positive changes for the environment and society they live in.

The beginnings of higher education in Kosovo date back to the late 50's when a number of two-year high schools of teaching were established which started with the Pedagogical School in Prishtina, which also included several other departments in 1958. With the establishment of the University of Prishtina in 1969, the existing branches became part of the new university, which was established by law, by the Assembly of the Autonomous Socialist Province of Kosovo (Kosovo Institute for Policy and Development, 2007). Higher education in Kosovo had a major challenge in the 90s due to political developments in the country, causing educational life to take place in private houses until the creation of new political circumstances. Despite these developments, higher education consolidated rather quickly, making great strides towards reforms and providing access to all those who wish to pursue higher

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studies in institutions of higher education. As a result, in addition to the University of Prishtina, several other universities were opened which had served as higher schools earlier.

Being aware of this, despite the many challenges that Kosovo had, higher education had the right attention and thus the University of Prishtina, as the first university institution in the country, resumed functioning at maximum capacity in 2001, when the process of re-compilation also began of the curricula of study programs and relevant faculties. Seeing that the system of higher education in accordance with the Bologna Process, which was introduced in Europe in 1999, had brought deep reforms in higher education systems throughout Europe, Kosovo also started the implementation of this system since 2001 (Kosovo Accreditation Agency, 2020). Despite the improvement achieved and the application of these reforms, however, there were still a large number of shortcomings that, as such, do not provide the appropriate quality in higher education studies. Seeing the shortcomings in the field of education and especially in higher education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), as responsible for the regulation and development of higher education in the Republic of Kosovo, has started reforms in VET for several years now with aim of preparing the future workforce with the right skills needed by the labour market (KEEN, 2019). The Law on Higher Education was approved in May 2003 and was drafted in accordance with the latest developments in European higher education systems (Riinvest, 2004).

The fact that Kosovo was characterized as a country with a young population, the interest in pursuing higher studies at the University was very high. Since the interest of young people to advance in institutions of higher education was very great, it seemed clear that the University of Prishtina did not meet all the needs of the country. In order to fulfil as much as possible the needs of the country and the demands of young people, the government of that time decided to open a number of universities in some other cities that existed earlier as high schools with certain programs that functioned as branches of the University of Prishtina. The public university institutions established in other municipalities have followed a model of development of the University of Pristina, not diversifying the educational offer according to the demands of the labour market in their region (Aliu, 2019).

II. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF UNIVERSITY HAXHI ZEKA

University Haxhi Zeka in Peja was founded as a university in 2011 by decision of the Assembly of Kosovo. In the first years of its establishment, the University had 5 academic units: the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Agribusiness, the Faculty of Business, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Management in Tourism, Hospitality and Environment. Recently, another unit has been added to this University, the Faculty of Technology of Information in Business and Economy. In the beginning, the interest of young people to enrol in this institution was very high and there was high competition for a position. Of course, with the opening of this university, a much better and more favourable opportunity was created for many families in the region who had economic difficulties to send their children to the University of Pristina or to any other university in the region or to European countries and wider.

In order to strengthen its position in the ranking of world universities and to be as competitive as possible with other universities, University Haxhi Zeka in Peja has taken several important steps by joining various organizations such as: European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI), Balkan Universities Association (Memberships, 2024), etc., and has signed various international and regional agreements aimed at the mobility of academic staff, researchers, experts and students; design and application in joint research and scientific projects which are financed by different programs. Also, special importance has been given to the promotion of joint academic activities in areas of common interest with international partners, such as the participation and organization of seminars and conferences, the organization of the summer university as well as the organization of joint artistic and cultural programs. In addition to these and other common aspects aimed at advancing the academic staff and improving the position and image of the university, the exchange of publications and other academic materials is also foreseen. Despite this, the number of mobility of academic staff and students is still very small, although there are all the possibilities for this, which are made possible by a number of cooperation memoranda with many international and regional universities.

In recent years, University Haxhi Zeka has managed to benefit in different ways from several international projects. These projects are: Erasmus+ T2P, Western Balkans Urban Agriculture Initiative, MSc in Sustainable Food Production Systems (STEPS), Enhancing Research Culture in Higher Education in Kosovo – ResearchCult”, EUFORIA, Increasing the Financial Autonomy and Accountability of Public Institutions of Higher Education in Kosovo (FAITH), Supporting the Internationalization of the Higher Education System through the creation of the Student Union of Kosovo - (SIHEKSU), Competent student, experienced graduate, ENEMLOS, etc . In the framework of these projects, University Haxhi Zeka is involved in the organization and participation in several

workshops and seminars related to the research and improvement of curricula, the realization of study visits in several different European countries, the benefit of a software program for managing the practical work of students, technological equipment for teaching as well as the QUADIC Project (Quality development of international cooperation) from the ERASMUS + program, which deals with the internationalization of universities and capacity building for international projects (Projects, 2024).

The enthusiasm of young people to pursue studies in this institution began to fade, especially due to the fact that even after completing their studies, there was no secure job market for graduates, or often due to the high degree of nepotism and different political favours regarding employment. In recent years, the number of students in higher education has been decreasing, and this decrease is greater in public institutions of higher education in Kosovo. Also, the opening of a large number of private colleges where the criterion for completing studies is lower and the conditions for study are better, has influenced that the interest in private colleges grows more simply with the idea of having a faculty degree. Unfortunately, few of the existing colleges are better than the University of Prishtina. Even worse, they have created the same profiles and employ half-time professors from the University of Prishtina, who are undoubtedly better behaved in these institutions (Kosovo Institute for Policy and Development, 2007).

Despite the fact that the University has continuously signed cooperation agreements with public and private institutions, as well as a large number of businesses for practice during studies and employment opportunities after completing studies, the number of employees is relatively very low, affecting also in the decline of young people's interest in pursuing studies at this university. Although the university as its own mission has the matching of programmes with the needs of the region, which refer to its unique area with developed agriculture, business infrastructure, as well as cultural traditions, including the Arts and touristic areas, and as its main goal it has the inclusion of issues of strategic importance in teaching, quality assurance, higher level of internationalization and a new approach which is oriented towards scientific research and the best possible positioning of the university next to well-known international universities, it is still not enough for this to attract more students and to attract young people due to the fact that they do not manage to enter the labour market and are often forced to do jobs that they could have done even without attending these studies.

According to the Kosovo Accreditation Agency, which accredits and re-accredits public and private higher education institutions in Kosovo, the data speak of a lack of coordination and planning of the development of higher education with the needs of the market in the country (Kosovo Accreditation Agency, 2020). The practical work of students remains an underdeveloped aspect. The study programs do not officially envisage the practical work of students as part of the curriculum and the engagement in practical work is done individually by the students and not in a controlled manner by the institution (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2022). In addition to many difficulties, a very big problem that directly affects the interest of young people in higher education is the insufficient number of qualified academic personnel, with some subjects being taught by inadequate personnel that are profiled in other subjects and teach a large number of subjects. This also affects the quality of higher education. Then the large number of students in groups presents a challenge for teachers who fail to pay due attention to the individual needs of students, which also results in the evaluation of knowledge in a superficial way. Another fact that is affecting quite a lot is the trend of young people fleeing to the most developed countries, where most of them manage to enter the labour market of the receiving country and improve their social and economic situation.

To have a better understanding of the situation, the data have been collected from the directorates of the University that reveal clearly our concern:

Table 1: The number of applicants in academic units in 2020-2024 (Number of applicants for academic years 2020-2024, 2024)

	Faculty	Field of study	Number of applicants 2023-2024	Number of applicants 2022-2023	Number of applicants 2021-2022	Number of applicants 2020-2021
1	Faculty of Business	Business Management - BA	140	216	177	229
2	Faculty of Business	Business Management – Bosnian - BA	33	28	30	45
3	Faculty of Business	Technology of Information in Business and Economy - BA	72	0	0	0
4	Faculty of Business	Business Management – Master	24	57	177	132
5	Faculty of Business	Business Management – Bosnian - MA	10	18	33	29
6	Faculty of Business	Human Resources Management - MA	70	57	85	66
7	Faculty of Business	Informatics in Business - MA	27	41	56	0

	Faculty	Field of study	Number of applicants 2023-2024	Number of applicants 2022-2023	Number of applicants 2021-2022	Number of applicants 2020-2021
8	Faculty of Law	General Law - BA	98	89	129	271
9	Faculty of Law	International and European Law - MA	41	41	69	62
10	Faculty of Manag. in Tourism Hospit. & Env.	Management in Tourism Hospitality and Environment - BA	56	91	80	113
11	Faculty of Manag. in Tourism Hospit. & Env.	Management in Tourism – Bosnian - BA	18	19	19	21
12	Faculty of Manag. in Tourism Hospit. & Env.	Management of Environment - MA	13	15	24	0
13	Faculty of Agribusiness	Plant Production Technology - Bachelor	35	36	21	34
14	Faculty of Agribusiness	Agro-environment & Agro-ecology - BA	26	21	24	19
15	Faculty of Agribusiness	Food Technology - BA	67	46	62	73
16	Faculty of Agribusiness	Sustainable Food Production Systems - MA	23	32	51	0
17	Faculty of Arts	Education in Music - BA	9	24	21	24
18	Faculty of Arts	Artistic Education in Interpretation - BA	7	11	8	17
19	Faculty of Arts	Musical Education - MA	8	11	31	29

The data on Table 1 show the number of applicants in a four-year period for each academic unit and their respective programmes. As can be seen, the number of applicants has fallen largely, especially in the Faculty of Law with a decrease of more than 60% and Faculty of Business with a decrease of around 40%. If we compare academic year 2023-2024 with the academic year 2011-2012 when the university was founded, the difference is even higher than the one presented with the academic year 2020-2021. While in the previous academic years the number of applicants that competed for a place at the university was 3 or 4 for one place, the situation now appears to be very discouraging as the number of applicants may sometimes be even lower than the quota provided for the number of enrolled students. In the previous years, the allowed quota for registration of the students was filled in the first open call for application, whereas now the university is compelled to make the second or even third call for application associated with several campaigns in secondary schools to encourage students so that they can reach the sufficient number of students necessary to maintain a programme. So now, there is almost no competition between the students, and the place is almost granted to any applicant who applies and enters a test. This fact doesn't guarantee any success because in this case knowledge of the applicants does not necessarily meet with the requirements of the test and the specific programme. In such a situation, the main problem is no longer the enrolment of the students, but their completion with a very high proportion of them dropping out before they complete their degree. This clearly demonstrates that the lack of completion is closely related to the inadequate preparation for the university which is clearly not the fault of the institution of higher education, but the secondary school students who have not managed to gain the sufficient knowledge during the course of their studies and are not prepared for the rigors of the high-level university work and the challenges associated with it.

Table 2: The number of enrolled students in academic units in 2020-2024 (Number of Enrolled Students 2020-2024, 2024)

	Faculty	Field of study	Number of enrolled students 2023-2024	Number of enrolled students 2022-2023	Number of enrolled students 2021-2022	Number of enrolled students 2020-2021
1	Faculty of Business	Business Management - BA	129	149	166	212
2	Faculty of Business	Business Management – Bosnian - BA	30	39	30	45
3	Faculty of Business	Technology of Information in Business and Economy - BA	65	0	0	0
4	Faculty of Business	Business Management – Master	24	52	112	120
5	Faculty of Business	Business Management – Bosnian - MA	10	16	27	29

	Faculty	Field of study	Number of enrolled students 2023-2024	Number of enrolled students 2022-2023	Number of enrolled students 2021-2022	Number of enrolled students 2020-2021
6	Faculty of Business	Human Resources Management - MA	67	54	78	50
7	Faculty of Business	Informatics in Business - MA	25	40	55	0
8	Faculty of Law	General Law - BA	83	0	124	254
9	Faculty of Law	International and European Law - MA	28	30	40	40
10	Faculty of Manag. in Tourism Hospit. & Env.	Management in Tourism Hospitality and Environment - BA	50	50	73	107
11	Faculty of Manag. in Tourism Hospit. & Env.	Management in Tourism – Bosnian - BA	18	21	18	21
12	Faculty of Manag. in Tourism Hospit. & Env.	Management of Environment - MA	13	14	24	0
13	Faculty of Agribusiness	Plant Production Technology - Bachelor	32	30	20	31
14	Faculty of Agribusiness	Agro-environment & Agro-ecology - BA	24	20	23	17
15	Faculty of Agribusiness	Food Technology - BA	53	42	58	69
16	Faculty of Agribusiness	Sustainable Food Production Systems - MA	22	25	25	0
17	Faculty of Arts	Education in Music - BA	8	20	17	20
18	Faculty of Arts	Artistic Education in Interpretation - BA	5	10	6	12
19	Faculty of Arts	Musical Education - MA	5	5	8	8

The data on Table 2 show the number of students that have been admitted for each specific unit of each of the existing programmes. These numbers reveal that the number is much lower in several programmes. If this trend continues, then the situation is presumed to be much worse in the years to come and most programmes will not manage to get the accreditation from the Kosovo Agency of Accreditation due to the insufficient number of the students in each programme. The only way to try to keep the number of students sufficient to continue with the organization and continuation of work seems to be the establishment of new programmes that responds to the demand for new skills and provides a guaranteed path of the graduates to the labour market as soon as they have finished their studies, such as the case of the establishment of the academic unit Technology in Information Business and Economy which has newly been created and has a higher number of applicants and admitted students. Even though it is the first year of its establishment, 100 students were admitted from the total number of applicants of 130. Last year this programme existed as part of the Faculty of Business and had 65 students. This increase makes it the programme that currently has the largest number of first-year students in all units of University Haxhi Zeka. This case is promising and should appeal to the management of the University to engage experts of the field that can evaluate the situation and the needs properly and decide on the best methods and practises that guarantee a successful process that serve to the establishment of the new programmes in compliance with the global trends.

Being aware of the decline of young people's interest in pursuing higher studies in institutions of higher education, the government of Kosovo made a decision according to which public higher education in Kosovo should be free of charge for all those who wish to study at the bachelor and master levels, while for doctoral students there will be special facilities, starting from the academic year 2021/2022 which is guaranteed by the Administrative Instruction (AI) "Application of student payments in public institutions of higher education" (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2021). Although this comes as a great relief to many young people and enables them to become part of student life in pursuit of their future career aspirations, it is still not believed to have had as much of an impact on the fact that the completion of studies does not guarantee them a position which is in accordance with the studies they have completed. There are even many cases when young people enrol in the University only to have the opportunity to secure a work visa in other more developed countries for certain periods. The number of students who complete their studies and graduate from public institutions of higher education continues to be below 20% (Aliu, 2019).

III. CONCLUSIONS

Higher education in Kosovo, despite the great importance it has for the country in the development and building of human capacities, is facing many difficulties that have significantly affected the quality of higher education and the decline in the rate of young people pursuing studies in institutions of higher education. The intended reforms have not managed to have an effect. This decline in interest in general has also affected the University Haxhi Zeka in Peja, which, despite offering some very useful programs, the interest of young people is always lower. The university has made some reforms in order to maintain the number of students and has opened some new programmes, but even they do not guarantee stability as the interest in new programmes starts to decline after a while. The situation requests the involvement of all the stakeholders that deal with education in Kosovo to be active in order to develop the strategies that improve student retention and guarantee long-term success. The focus should be on more practical programmes that strengthen student engagement and offer to the student the safe tool to successful career opportunities and prospects. It is crucial to explore and identify the main factors that are having the greatest impact on students' loss of interest in higher education and respond to them with high seriousness and commitment so that the collapse in confidence in the institutions of higher education diminishes. The Ministry of Education Science and Technology as the main institution responsible for the regulation and development of higher education in the Republic of Kosovo should engage actively in fostering the most up to date practises and follow successful experiences which are easily implemented and achieve the desired goal. All the education stakeholders should be positioned to defend, protect and sustain the extremely important role of higher education as a trusted and valuable source of knowledge, education and prosperity.

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